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What caused the decline in child arrests in England and Wales: the Howard League's programme or something else?

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Abstract

There has been a steep decline in child arrests in recent years. The Howard League report *Child Arrests in England and Wales 2017* attributes this to a Howard League programme of work with police. We show the decline in arrests began well before that programme of work, and conclude the report's claims are unfounded. However, there is strong evidence that the decline in arrests is due to the long-term fall in child offending rates, probably caused by security improvements. While we are sympathetic to the aims of the Howard League, if security is having such positive effects in terms of safer communities and fewer children being processed through the criminal justice system, then it should command wide support.

Suggested keywords: Child arrests; Programme to reduce child arrests; Howard League; adolescent offending; Youth Justice; crime drop; security hypothesis; policing.

Introduction

One of us [Laycock] has been a member of the Howard League for Penal Reform for many years; we are all sympathetic to its aims. The Howard League is "a national charity working for less crime, safer communities, fewer people in prison." (Howard League 2018a). In September 2017 it published *Child Arrests in England and Wales 2017* (Howard League 2018b). The report was distributed with the following supporting statement:

> "I am writing to tell you about something **extraordinary** – a change that will help to **reduce crime** and **give tens of thousands of children a brighter future**. Back in 2010, police in England and Wales made almost a quarter of a million arrests of children. … Academics have found that the more contact a child has with the criminal system, the more entrenched they become, which increases offending rates. **So the Howard League decided to do something about it...**We have been supporting police forces up and down the country, encouraging them to adopt a different approach and to keep as many boys and girls as possible out of the criminal justice system. And it's working. Together, we have achieved a **68 per cent reduction** in child arrests in seven years ….The number of children in prison has been reduced by 60 per cent." (Crook 2018, emphasis in original)

The report's findings were featured in major news outlets including the BBC (2018a, 2018b). The report describes activities undertaken with police that comprise The Programme to Reduce Child Arrests (*The Programme*), and contains short descriptive statements referring to five police forces. For example, the police "force has been proactive in educating officers about the issues some children face, such as childhood trauma." (Essex); "a range of activities has promoted a growing recognition and understanding of early intervention and prevention which is helping divert children into support services" (Cumbria); and "The force informs us that the work they have done has 'nurtured officers and raised their awareness of less intrusive methods of investigation than arrest'"

(South Wales Police). It is not clear how many police forces were involved, and there is no in-depth information on what was delivered in practice or evaluation of the different activities that occurred as a result of *The Programme*.

The Briefing lists annual arrest data showing a 68 per cent decline between 2010 and 2017. This is the extent of the quantitative analysis. The report concludes that the decline in arrests was due to The Programme. In what follows we show that the evaluation was weak and the conclusion drawn was invalid. We then offer an alternative explanation for the decline in child arrests.

The Data and their Interpretation

The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 years, and the Howard League report refers to those aged 10 to 17. Three quarters (76.4%) of these arrestees were aged 15-17 in 2017 (Ministry of Justice 2018). The Howard League 2018 report used data from 2010, though earlier data are available in previous Howard League reports (Howard League 2013). Here we show the same child arrest data, from the Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, as Figure 1 for 2007 onwards.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1 shows that there is no change in the direction of the trend in arrests after the start of *The Programme*. That is, arrests were clearly declining before *The Programme* was introduced. Hence the decline since 2010 cannot safely be attributed to *The Programme* based on the evidence in the Howard League report. Moreover, since the trend after 2010 is almost exactly the same as before, the more appropriate interpretation of this data is that *The Programme* had no impact. The lack of in-depth information on what was done and how it was expressed in police treatment of adolescents makes it impossible to draw clear conclusions. While some previous crime prevention projects have generated impact in advance of their implementation (Smith, Clarke and Pease 2003), for example due to publicity, it seems unlikely that police forces began the programmatic work three or more years before it was formally introduced.

Other data and another explanation

In our estimation, the decline in arrests most probably reflects a real long-term decline in offending by children and young people. There have been steep declines in rates of many crime types including burglary, car crime and assaults since the early 1990s across high income countries (Tseloni et al 2010).

There is strong research evidence that global falls in crime are disproportionately reflected in declines in offending among children and young people (Farrell et al 2015). For example, in Scotland convictions of males aged 17 fell by 63 per cent between 1989 and 2011, with the corresponding fall for females 37 per cent (Matthews and Minton 2017); in Australia amongst cohorts born in 1984 and 1994, by age 21 convictions for property crime fell by 56 per cent and for violent crime by 32 per cent (Payne et al 2018); in the United States, arrest rates for children aged 10-17 for property crimes fell by 59-88 per cent between 1988 and 2012, and for violent crimes by 56 per cent (National Centre for Juvenile Justice 2014); and in Denmark convictions for all crimes amongst those aged 15-17 fell by 37 per cent between 2010 and 2016 (Statistics Denmark; see also Andersen et al. 2016). These figures suggest that there has been a remarkable international trend in reduced offending and reduced involvement in criminal justice processes amongst young people.

Between 2007 and 2017, household crime almost halved according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Home Office 2017). Assuming it had the usual effect on adolescent offending that was identified in the previous paragraph, other things being equal, this likely explains the reduction in arrests. That is, the evidence suggests the drop in youth crime arrests in England and Wales (like that in other countries) reflects a real fall in youth crime rather than a change in policing practice.

We hypothesise that the fall in youth crime was precipitated largely by improvements in security, in particular of cars and households. Car theft and burglary have been found to be typical debut crimes

from which young offenders are more likely to progress to commit further crime (Svensson 2002, Owen and Cooper 2013), and both have dropped dramatically since the early 1990s in England and Wales. The security of cars has improved enormously (Farrell et al 2011a) and has done so internationally, in particular with the introduction of electronic immobilisers whose effectiveness in reducing car theft has been found in several studies (e.g. Farrell et al 2011b; van Ours and Vollaard 2016). An acid test was found in a 'natural experiment' in Australia where such immobilisers were required in Western Australia prior to the rest of the country: falls in car theft began in Western Australia and then took off elsewhere, coinciding in each case with the timings for statutory requirements for immobilisers (Farrell et al 2011b). The impact on young people's car theft in particular is shown by the greater fall in temporary theft (for example for joyriding) in England and Wales compared to permanent theft (for profit) (Farrell et al 2014: 463). A corollary of fewer young people committing car theft is that there are fewer of them to recruit others into car theft and fewer thereby liable to be drawn into more serious criminal careers. Likewise, there is strong evidence that residential burglary has declined due to household security improvements, particularly more and better door deadlocks and window locks as well as security lighting that would be expected to induce similarly disproportionate reductions in youth crime (Tilley et al. 2015; Tseloni et al. 2017). That is, security improvements and their effects on crime seem to us likely to be the main source of the reductions in youth arrests and convictions both in England and Wales and in other jurisdictions. It fits well with the data we have found.

It remains possible that there are other explanations for the international falls in many types of crime, and for the associated falls in youth offending. Other plausible explanations offered to date have, however, been largely falsified (Farrell et al. 2014). It is similarly possible that the causes of the initial impetus for the crime drop and of youth involvement in crime are distinct. Overall, however, we think that a significant amount of evidence suggests neither of these possibilities is at all likely.

Conclusion

We understand that special interest charities have a great deal invested in demonstrating that their policies are not only right (as the revised police procedures for children may well be), but are also effective. More rigour is required in this case if the claims for success are to be seen as credible as we move toward evidence-based policy and practice. Contrary to the claims of the Howard League report, we conclude that the decline in arrests of children and young people was due to the longer-term decline in offending, and there is strong evidence that this was caused substantially by improvements to security. If the Howard League's efforts played any part at all, given the pre-existing trends it was at best only a very small one.

Testing a hypothesis that the efforts of the Howard League contributed to the reduction in child arrests would in our view require quite detailed specifications of what interventions were made in different areas under the auspices of the programme. This would allow predictions of particular patterns of change to be derived, for example by place, time, child age, and offence type, for which data could be assembled retrospectively. Comparison to similar areas without the programme, where the alternate set of 'prior' policing interventions can be specified, might also be informative. The exercise should involve teasing out for the Howard League programme what we have referred to as expected data 'signatures' (Farrell et at 2016 and Tilley et al 2019). In connection with our own work, expected data signatures corroborating our security hypothesis have included changes in patterns of temporary and permanent theft of vehicles in England and Wales and variations in the timing of vehicle theft drops in different parts of Australia to which we have already referred.

So far as we are concerned, less crime means safer communities and, other things being equal, fewer people in prison and fewer children and young people being processed through the criminal justice system, with all the reductions in personal and social costs that follow. If security improvements are achieving this, policies directed at that should likewise command wide support. We think that the evidence here is now quite compelling.

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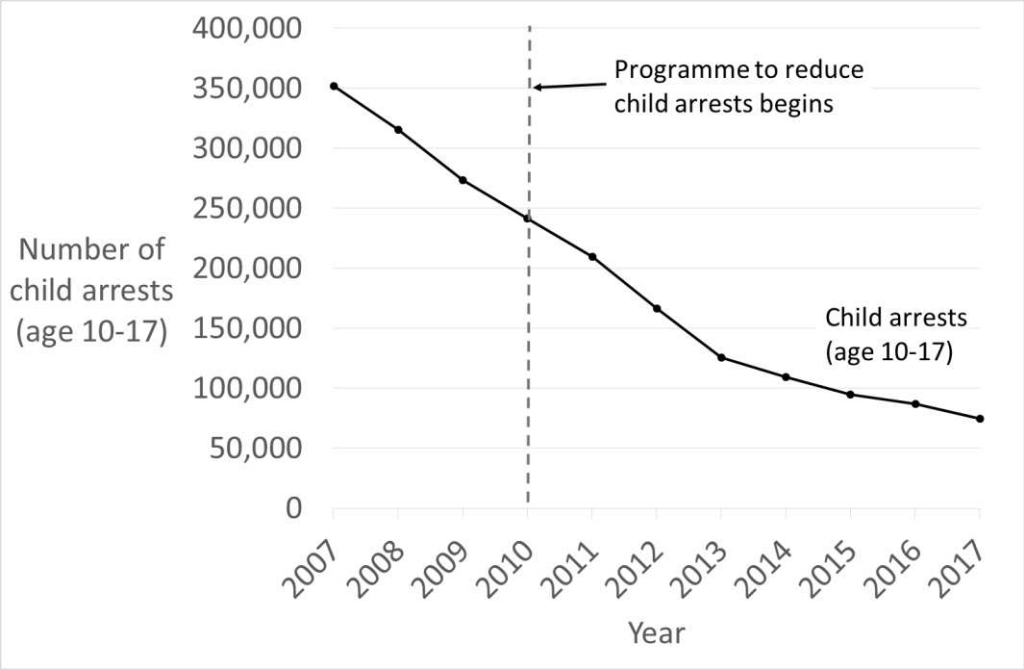

Figure 1: Child arrests in England and Wales 2007-2017 (Source: Ministry of Justice 2018)